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Torah and Truth: Theology in the Obituary Pages



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Theological lessons appear in the most unexpected places. The February 12, 2012 edition of *The New York Times* included an obituary for Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut, who died February 8 in Toronto at age 99.

The obituaries in *The New York Times* are legendary, rivaled only by those in *The Times* of London. Both papers feature unexpectedly lengthy obituaries devoted to those who made a difference in their times.

Rabbi Plaut was one of those figures. As Margalit Fox of the *Times* explained, the rabbi was one of the most influential figures in Reform Judaism, North American Judaism's most liberal major branch.

As Fox stated, Rabbi Plaut was “a rabbi whose vast, scholarly and ardently contemporary edition of the Torah has helped define Reform Judaism in late-20th-century North America.”

Rabbi Plaut's commentary on the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) was “the first non-Orthodox full commentary on the Torah published in English for congregational use,” said Rabbi Daniel H. Frelander, an official with the Union for Reform Judaism.

Previous to Rabbi Plaut's work on the Torah, congregations had been dependent on the work of Rabbi Joseph M. Hertz, written from the perspective of Orthodox Judaism,



affirming the divine inspiration of the text as given through Moses.

Reform Judaism does not require any belief in a personal God, and many adherents are agnostics or atheists in terms of traditional theism.

Rabbi Plaut wrote his commentary on the Torah for this movement and its congregations, and in the introduction to the work, he stated what he believed about the Bible:

“God is not the author of the text, the people are; but God’s voice may be heard through theirs if we listen with open minds.”

With those words, Rabbi Plaut honestly stated what he believed about the Bible, and specifically about the Torah. God is not the author of the text. The text was not divinely revealed to Moses, nor to anyone else. The Torah was the literary achievement of the Jews. God’s voice “may be heard through theirs if we listen with open minds.”

That is an amazing statement, and it may even shock some readers who are unaware of the fact that many people consider the Bible to be nothing more than a human book. In the secular academy and among liberal Bible scholars, the Old Testament is increasingly referred to as an example of “Ancient Near Eastern Literature.”

The rabbi’s statement is not merely indicative of Reform Judaism, but of the belief about the Bible held within liberal Christianity. Rabbi Plaut’s words are hauntingly reminiscent of the arguments offered by Rudolf Bultmann, the most influential liberal New Testament scholar of the twentieth century.

Here we see the great dividing line — the line that divides those who affirm the Bible as the inspired Word of God and those who see the Bible as a human product. Everything flows from where one stands with respect to this line, and no one can avoid taking a stand.

Sometimes, the most urgent issues in theology show up where you least expect. Then again, maybe the obituaries serve us well by reminding us, by their very nature, of what matters.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler

Margalit Fox, “[W. Gunther Plaut Dies at 99; Defined Reform Judaism](#),” *The New York Times*, Sunday, February 12, 2012.

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